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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000174

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SUBJECT: REFERENDUM UPDATE - FIVE DAYS OUT

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: With less than a week until President Chavez's February 15 constitutional referendum on removing official term limits, the Venezuelan President has shifted gears from warning of an impending "civil war" to calling for peace and demanding an end to political violence by his radical supporters. In an unusual display of unity and organization, the opposition brought out several hundred thousand supporters of the "No" vote to march peacefully across Caracas on February 7. Both sides continue to focus their campaigns on eliminating abstentionism among their electoral base. End Summary.

12. (C) Several hundred thousand supporters of the "No" campaign marched peacefully en masse February 7 over an 18 kilometer route. The event began slowly in the impoverished Caracas neighborhood of Petare, gaining momentum -- and many more marchers -- as it headed towards the safer and more upscale neighborhoods in Chacao and concluded in Plaza Venezuela. Chavez announced the following day from Falcon State that he had seen interviews with "No" marchers and while he did not reject the march, he lamented that the participants had been "poisoned" by the pro-opposition press. He downplayed the numbers, pledging that Chavismo could produce millions of marchers in favor of "Yes." Many opposition members see the huge turnout, the largest in the last two years, as evidence that they enjoy considerable popular support and that the "No" campaign could pull off a victory on the 15th.

CHAVEZ DENOUNCES RADICAL SUPPORTERS

13. (C) Chavez has changed his tone over the past few days, urging peace and moderation among his supporters. This follows weeks of tense confrontations between student activists and the police, threats by Chavez that the country could dissolve into "civil war," and violent acts by the radical leftwing militant group "La Piedrita". The Venezuelan President called on the police February 7 to arrest the leader of La Piedrita, Valentin Santana, warning that his behavior "cannot be tolerated." He also criticized leftwing militant Lina Ron, telling Venezuela TV that she cannot be a "revolutionary" if she ignores his orders to tone down her radical statements. Various advertisements have run in pro-government media outlets equating Chavez with peace and "love," a revival of the campaign strategy he successfully employed in the 2006 presidential election. He

told Venevision TV February 8 that he would respect the results of the referendum, and asked the opposition to pledge to do the same.

¶4. (SBU) The opposition has derided Chavez's latest peaceful declarations as merely a campaign strategy and sought to maintain public attention on recent political violence. Secretary General of Democratic Action (AD) party Henry Ramos called Chavez's words "pure rhetoric" and claimed that the radical groups were being armed and financed by the GBRV. He pointed out that the weapons used by La Piedrita "cannot be found on the corner." Un Nuevo Tiempo President Omar Baboza asserted February 8 that he welcomed Chavez's calls for peace, but he found them insincere and suggested they were merely a part of Chavez's broader electoral strategy. Baboza contended that "it is difficult to believe that Chavez until now did not realize (his supporters' radicalism)... now he wants to pretend to be a little lamb."

AD HEADQUARTERS ATTACKED

¶5. (SBU) Unknown assailants threw a grenade February 7 at the headquarters of the opposition Democratic Action (AD) party in Caracas. The grenade damaged the facade of the building but there were no reported injuries. AD President Henry Ramos told reporters February 8 that it was unclear who was responsible, but pointed out that it was the latest in a series of attacks against critics of the GBRV. Chavez condemned the attacks and ordered the police to investigate, but complained when AD refused to allow investigators to gain access to the building. Ramos responded that he feared the police would "manipulate" the crime scene and hide evidence, presumably of Chavista involvement.

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¶6. (C) Comment: Unlike in previous elections, Chavez has neither initiated nor appears to be planning to end his campaign with a mass rally. Nevertheless, he has actively campaigned in the street, pressing the flesh and making the case that February 15 is a referendum on Chavez's political future and that of his revolution. He did not travel to Bolivia for his close ally President Evo Morales' successful constitutional referendum, suggesting that Chavez is unwilling to miss even a single day of campaigning. The opposition has been heartened by the turnout February 7, but even the most die-hard opposition analysts note that like in December 2007, this election result will be based on whether or not Chavez and the PSUV can get out their supporters. End Comment.

CAULFIELD